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Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2006

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Abstract: *Development of a democratic system and market economy in the Slovak Republic has been going on for less than two decades. The same applies to the development of political marketing. Using the example of the Slovak Parliamentary Elections in 2006, we analyse the situation in the political market, voters' political perceptions, the marketing activities of the political parties and candidates, main topics of election campaign, role of the media and election results. We also offer a short summary of key legislative changes which influenced the 2006 election campaign.*

Key words: *political marketing, voters' political perceptions, turnout, campaign topics, election legislation, electronic media, campaign expenditures, election results.*

Introduction

The necessary condition for the implementation of marketing is the market itself. The development of a market economy in the SR has only been underway for two decades. In implementing marketing on a practical level, it has been possible to make use of fruitful experiences from abroad. New marketing departments have been opened in universities and companies. Theory has quite often run one step behind intuitive marketing activities.

In the political arena, a totally new set of conditions was created, enabling the introduction of free democratic elections. Politics, politicians and voters passed through an initial layman phase and progressed toward more fully elaborated concepts which attempt to understand the voter in a manner similar to consumer studies in commercial marketing.

Several areas of social studies are concerned with particular political fields, e.g., political science, sociology, psychology. Their functioning has a longer tradition than marketing, and marketing experts must make use of knowledge acquired in these fields. It is interesting to note who has commented on the election process in Slovakia: predominantly employees of market research agencies, political scientists,

sociologists. Only exceptionally does one come across the opinions of marketing experts.

Political marketing must, quite naturally, find its place within the educational programs in schools. The first school to react to this in the SR was the Faculty of Commerce of the University of Economic Studies in Bratislava, where the theory of political marketing has been lectured on and researched for several years.

The situation before the 2006 parliamentary elections

The Chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, by his decree No. 89/2006 (Coll.) of 15 February 2006, announced elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic. He stipulated that the day of elections would be Saturday, 17 June 2006. The elections were held in line with Act No. 333/2004 (Coll.) on Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

The reason for early elections was the exit of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) from the minority government of Mikuláš Dzurinda, which in addition to KDH was also comprised of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK). Rather than sticking to the regular timetable for parliamentary elections, a shortening of the time period between elections by up to three months was introduced.

In what follows, we analyze the situation before the 2006 elections from the point of view of the voters, their expectations, the marketing activities of political parties (especially those successful in the elections who received seats in the parliament (NR SR)) and arriving at election results.

Voters' political perceptions

Before each election, heightened activity may be observed in the following areas: the intensity of interest by representatives of individual political parties, the frequency of politicians' appearance in the mass media and the number of meetings and personal sessions with citizens. The chief aim is to address voters who have yet to make up their minds about which political party to elect.

Public opinion research carried out by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic in March 2006 (1156 respondents, standardized questionnaire) published in

an internal paper called *Slovakia Before Parliamentary Elections 2006*, showed 53 per cent of citizens were interested in politics, while 47 per cent were not interested.

On the basis of this analysis, it may be seen that men were much more interested in politics than women (60% vs. 47%). Taking into account first-time voters only, 36% of respondents were interested in politics; other age groups, apart from the retired (interest level 58%), were at the national average.

From an education standpoint, a correlation obtained between the educational level of the voter and the degree of interest in domestic politics (elementary education – 47% : 53%, incomplete secondary education – 49% : 51%, secondary with school leaving exam – 59% : 41%, university education – 63% : 37%).

Something worthy of attention is interest in politics broken down by political party preference, as shown in the following table:

| Are you interested in domestic political situation in Slovakia? | | |
|--|----------------------|--------------------------|
| (results in %) | | |
| Political preferences: | Interested in | Not interested in |
| SDKÚ-DS | 77 | 23 |
| SMK | 72 | 27 |
| SF | 70 | 30 |
| SMER-SD | 69 | 31 |
| I'S-HZDS | 63 | 37 |
| SNS | 58 | 42 |
| KDH | 52 | 48 |
| Would not go to vote | 18 | 82 |
| Does not know who to vote for | 29 | 71 |
| Average for the SR | 53 | 47 |

An important indicator of public interest in the political process is interest in participating in elections. The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic also investigated the importance assigned to particular types of elections. Based upon its own research methodology, the following results were gathered:

| What is the importance of particular type of elections? (results in %) | | |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Elections | July 2004 | August 2005 |
| Local (municipal) elections | 76 | 69 |
| Parliamentary elections | 67 | 67 |
| Presidential elections | 62 | 65 |
| Regional elections | 57 | 52 |
| Elections to the European Parliament | 45 | 47 |

For the sake of curiosity, I include data describing voter turnout in Slovak parliamentary elections since 1990.

| Year of elections | 1990 | 1992 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Voter turnout | 95.4 | 84.2 | 75.7 | 84.3 | 70.1 | 54.7 |

Key legislative changes

The Slovak parliamentary elections in 2006 were influenced by a change in the legislative environment (amendment of the Act No.333/2004 (Coll.) on Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic).

One of the most important changes may be considered to be the cancellation of the election moratorium, which enables election campaigns to be conducted with no time restrictions whatsoever (in the past, the campaign was closed 48 hours prior to elections).

A moratorium on election opinion polls was similarly cancelled, with the exception of election day itself (formerly, the moratorium extended to 14 days prior to the elections).

Also for the first time, the private electronic media were allowed into the election campaign – the broadcasting of political advertising was permitted.

What is more, the elections were held on a single day (as opposed to the earlier two days) and voters who had permanent residence in the SR but were not physically present on election day were allowed to vote by post.

The importance of preferred voting was increased. A candidate receiving at least 3 per cent of the preferred votes out of the absolute number of votes for the

particular political party won a parliamentary seat and had the right of priority over a candidate who finished higher, but did not meet the condition of having 3 per cent of the preferred votes. Under the previous rules, the threshold level was 10 per cent.

A so-called 'election bail' was introduced – involved parties had to pay a bail amounting to 500,000 Sk (€14,500), which was returned if the party received at least 2 per cent of the overall number of votes cast.

The 2006 election campaign in the Slovak Republic

In the 2006 election campaign, the following topics were dominant:

- a/ reforms and their potential cancellation,
- b/ misuse of power, buying of deputies, political culture,
- c/ cultural – ethical and national – state issues,
- d/ national and ethnic minorities and their rights.

Reforms and their potential cancellation became the main topic of a campaign fight between the two strongest political parties, SMER – Social Democracy, and the right-wing SDKÚ-DS.

SDKÚ-DS pursued and defended its own governmental reforms. Reforms were an overriding theme in messages to voters: issues like building the knowledge economy, supporting socially sensitive solutions which were fair at the same time and finalizing reform processes.

SDKÚ-DS derived benefits from international visits supporting Dzurinda's reform government and its measures (G. Bush, T. Blair, A. Merkel, J. M. Barosso, etc.). SDKÚ-DS invested the largest amount of money in outdoor advertising (€930,000). Altogether, SDKÚ-DS spent approximately €1,485,000 on the entire election 2006 campaign (1 euro = 35 Slovak crowns).

SMER-SD focused on the building of a social state based upon European social models, on solidarity and on offering to roll back the reforms of the "extreme right-wing Dzurinda government." At the same time, it offered substantial revelations about big cases of economic crime and political corruption. We would consider the signing of a treaty between SMER-SD and five trade union organizations to be an additional activity of importance both thematically and in terms of its play in the media.

In comparison to the 2002 elections, SMER-SD did not conduct an aggressive election campaign. The main messages of the campaign, frequently visible on billboards, were “Let’s decide” and “Towards people.” The SMER-SD campaign was not emotionally saturated. Only a series of television debates in which SMER-SD leader Robert Fico participated were more lively. SMER-SD spent approximately €1,300,000 on the 2006 campaign.

Behind these themes, there was an ideological dispute between right and left wings concerning the role of the state and individuals in meeting the needs of the people, ensuring freedom and taking responsibility for others. This dispute dominated almost the entire campaign. It was able to activate voters belonging to both parties and brought with it significant election benefits.

The topic of **misusing power, political culture and the buying of deputies** was a dominant theme of the Free Forum (Slobodné fórum – SF) and partially also of SMER-SD. It focused on restrictions set in place by Mikuláš Dzurinda and his SDKÚ-DS. This fundamental campaign theme for SF failed to attract sufficient voter support, with the result that SF did not obtain the 5% minimum required to gain seats in parliament, in spite of spending €0.885 million on the election campaign. For SMER-SD, this topic served as a supporting theme to activate voters against Dzurinda’s government.

Cultural/ethical and national/state issues have been at the heart of a dispute between the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Alliance of New Citizens (ANO) since 2002. Due to extremely low support for ANO before the elections (even though ANO's campaign costs were €0.51 million), KDH lacked an appropriate opponent, and traditional conservative themes like the protection of life, the family and law and order failed to mobilize even voters who had voted KDH in 2002. KDH found itself locked outside the main theme of the election battle. Because KDH left the government 4 months before the elections, SDKÚ-DS largely assumed the position of defender of the government, while the position of government critic was taken by SMER-SD.

KDH entered the elections with the slogan *For a solid life in Slovakia* and a campaign mascot, a stork named Kristián. Visuals for the "tease" stage of the campaign showed Kristián the Stork together with a variation on the main slogan, as

the faces of party leaders were gradually revealed. A problematic aspect of the KDH campaign slogan was its similarity to the main slogan of the Free Forum (SF): *Solid life, here and now!* Altogether, KDH spent approximately €750,000 on its election campaign.

Similarly, the People's Party – Movement for Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) found itself outside the main themes of the election fight. Mobilization of a previously strong voter base was likely sacrificed in favour of a moderate campaign designed to boost the coalition potential of ĽS-HZDS.

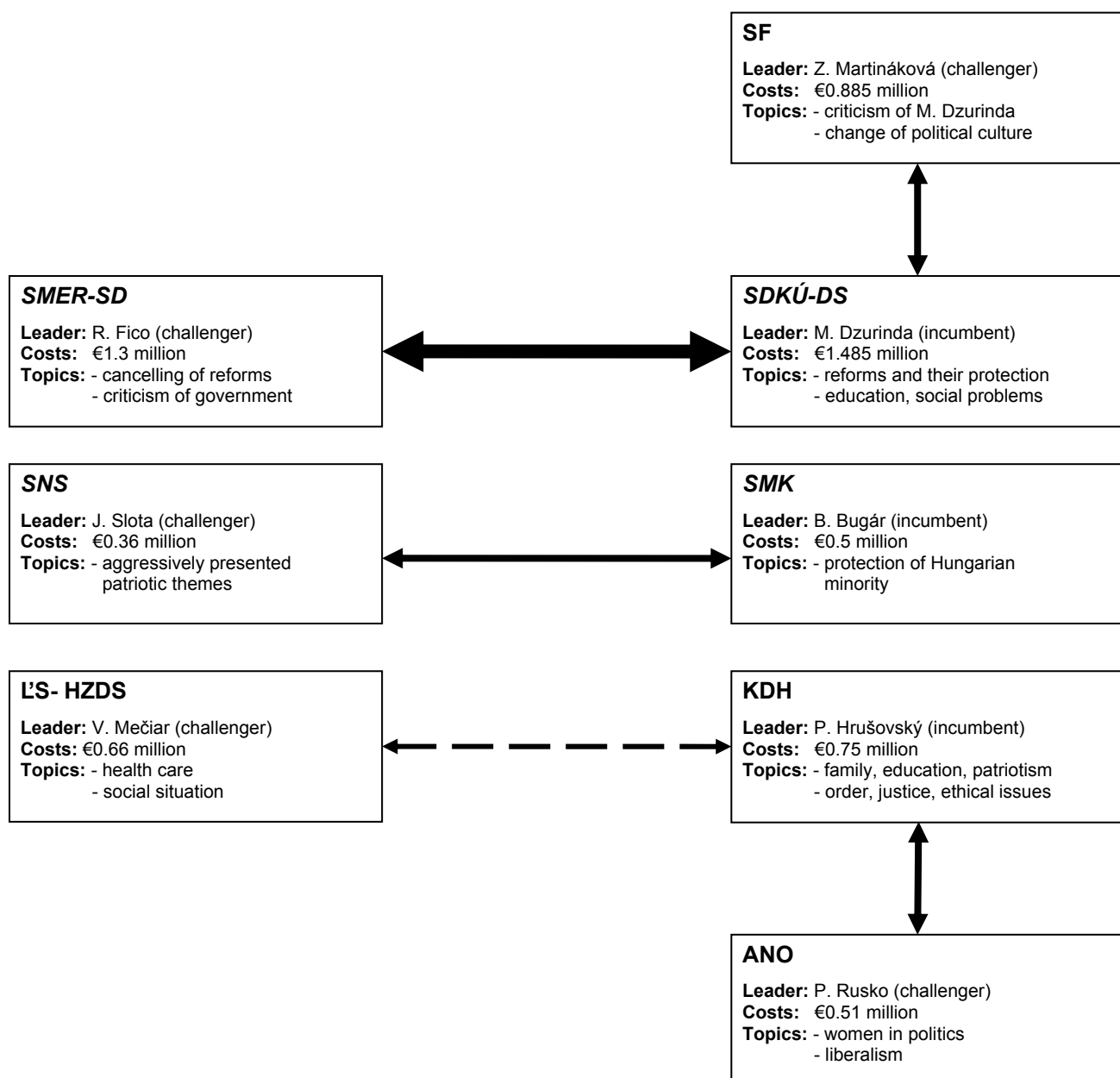
ĽS-HZDS primarily presented its leader Vladimír Mečiar; the vice chairman of the party, Viliam Veteška, led his own tourism-oriented campaign. ĽS-HZDS took out billboards featuring a cartoon character as its mascot, the Happy Lion. The billboards also carried slogans focused on the topics of education, the social situation and healthcare. Altogether, ĽS-HZDS spent approximately €660,000 on its election campaign.

The issue of **national and ethnic minorities and their rights** has traditionally dominated the campaign of the Slovak National Party (SNS). The campaign was anti-Hungarian in nature, with the key topic being “to return Slovakia to the Slovaks.” Sometimes the presentation bordered on the aggressive. Its chief messages were: “Slovak Government for Slovaks!”, “We are Slovaks!”, “We vote SNS!” The campaign was not, however, graphically unified and individual candidates presented themselves using the advertising media of their choice and with their own motives, messages and visual adjustments. SNS spent approximately €360,000 on its election campaign.

The other station in this campaign battle was taken up by the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), which resisted SNS attacks with considerable intensity. SMK ran a bilingual campaign whose chief messages focused on its leader, Béla Bugár: *“I like polite people. I'll vote Bugár.”* And the party: *“We do, what's needed. Express your opinion!”* SMK spent approximately €500,000 on its election campaign.

SNS and SMK both obtained the same number of seats in Parliament.

Scheme of the Slovak election campaign 2006



Information and final reports about election spending by the political parties is available on the website of the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic under Act No. 85/2005 (Coll.) on Financing of Political Parties and Political Movements.

The media in the election campaign

One of the most important changes in the 2006 election campaign was the involvement of the private electronic media in the process.

Television and radio stations for the first time were allowed to broadcast political advertising, and some political parties actually made use of it.

It was interesting to note the prices for TV election commercials: public service television – STV from €850 to €6,000 per spot; private TV Markíza from €2300 per spot, with election day commercials costing €160,000; spots on JOJ private television cost from €600 to €3000.

Due to the relatively high price for TV commercials, television advertising was not taken out on STV by KDH, SMK and SDKÚ-DS.

The next crucial element of the election campaign in the electronic media was the broadcasting of discussions set up in such a way as to achieve the highest possible viewership. The intent was also to stimulate a more lively give-and-take between representatives of the various political parties. For this reason, election debates were set up as fights between parties with high voter support, while other discussions included only the representatives of fairly weak political parties. Such division led to protests by the smaller parties, whose mutual discussions achieved only minimal rates and whose media impact was very weak.

The most important role within the group of radio stations was played by the most popular among them – the private station Rádio Expres and public service Slovak Radio. Election commercials were taken out on Slovak Radio by all relevant political parties. Slovak Radio also broadcasted 21 half-hour discussion programs featuring all 21 political parties in the contest. Questions from two interviewers were addressed to a single political representative.

Campaign broadcast were monitored not only by regulatory bodies (the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, Council of STV, Council of SRO and Central Election Committee), but also by the non-profit organization MEMO 98. The following conclusions are derived from the informational report by this organization:

1. The electronic media campaign was fairer than in the past. The media fulfilled its duty to inform, and citizens were able to obtain varied information on the topics of the debate.

2. On the other hand, the campaign was occasionally boring; it lacked emotional confrontation, predominantly due to careful, 'camping-on' tactics by parties reluctant to decrease their coalition potential.

3. The largest amount of advertising was taken out by the two opposition parties – SMER-SD and ĽS-HZDS.

4. The election dominated all news in the media under observation – STV devoted the most time to the subject.

5. The largest media space was allocated to Robert Fico (leader of SMER-SD), whereas Mikuláš Dzurinda (prime minister and leader of SDKÚ-DS) was in sixth position in presentation time.

6. The greatest amount of criticism was addressed to Vladimír Mečiar (leader of ĽS-HZDS) and Ján Slota (SNS leader).

In our opinion, this was the first time in the history of the modern Slovak Republic that the election campaign was not substantially manipulated by the media.

The print media's coverage of the election campaign was either more or less analytical or informative, depending upon the content orientation of the outlet. The print media brought information on the election campaign, programs and the personalities of individual campaign players. At the same time, they offered space for paid political advertising.

The internet was also put to considerable use in the 2006 election campaign. Websites of electronic and print media provided interactive chats with representatives of the individual parties involved and comparisons of their election programmes (in the form of analyses and answers to questionnaires). Surveys were put out to press agencies monitoring the parliamentary elections, as were instructions about how to proceed in the election room. Websites were also set up both by political parties and individual candidates. One of the parties mentioned above – the Civic Conservative Party (OKS) – ran its own internet TV station.

Election results

With 54.7% turnout, the winner of the election was SMER-SD with 29.14% voter support.

The election surprise were the results for SDKÚ-DS – instead of the expected 10%, they received 18.35% of votes.

L'S-HZDS suffered significant losses: the party lost 358,000 voters compared to the previous election. The party's 8.79% share was the worst election result in L'S-HZDS history.

Disappointment was also observed on the side of KDH, which anticipated more than 10%, but achieved only 8.31% in lost 46,000 previous voters from the 2002 elections.

Very good results were attained by SNS, which was supported by 11.73% of voters; improved results were also recorded by SMK, with 11.68%.

KSS, SF and ANO did not enter parliament.

Slovak Parliamentary Elections Results 2006

| Political party | Number of valid votes cast | Share of valid votes cast in % | Total seats allocated |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| SMER – SD | 671 185 | 29,14 | 50 |
| SDKÚ – DS | 422 815 | 18,35 | 31 |
| SNS | 270 230 | 11,73 | 20 |
| SMK | 269 111 | 11,68 | 20 |
| L'S – HZDS | 202 540 | 8,79 | 15 |
| KDH | 191 443 | 8,31 | 14 |

Finally, the government coalition in Slovakia after the elections in 2006 was constituted by SMER-SD, SNS and L'S-HZDS. The dominant member of the government, from both a program and influence point of view, is SMER-SD and Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Conclusion

The 2006 election campaign was fairly calm and lacking in extreme emotions. In its campaign messages, SMER-SD demarcated itself from SDKÚ-DS, dominant both thematically and in terms of influence. SDKÚ-DS, for its part, portrayed SMER-

SD's implementation of its election promises to be the most serious danger for the country.

The themes and presentation of KDH and ĽS-HZDS were so moderate in terms of proposals and communication that, with the exception of mutual disputes, they did not attract any other political party, and so no highlights were evident for either the media or voters.

SNS and SMK lined up for their usual political debate, aimed primarily at mobilizing their traditional voters.

The Free Forum (SF), Alliance of New Citizen (ANO), Movement for Democracy (HZD) and Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) all attempted to make a significant impact on the political process. They spent a lot of money and energy on the campaign, but with no success.

Involvement by the private electronic media within the election campaign contributed especially to better awareness on the part of voters. Despite this, the turnout was the lowest in history at 54.7%. This was due to a low level of creativity and insufficient campaign segmentation.

The winner was SMER-SD, which absorbed a large number of voters who considered themselves to be victims of the SDKÚ-DS dominated government.

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